

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 305 990

PS 017 849

TITLE Policy Statement on Child Day Care.
INSTITUTION National Council of Churches of Christ, New York,
N.Y.
PUB DATE 7 Nov 84
NOTE 12p.
AVAILABLE FROM National Council of Churches, Child Advocacy Office,
475 Riverside Drive, Room 572, New York, NY 10115
(\$0.75).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Advocacy; *Church Programs; *Church Role; *Day Care;
Early Childhood Education; *Institutional Mission;
Policy; *Religious Organizations
IDENTIFIERS *National Council of Churches

ABSTRACT

In 1984, the National Council of Churches adopted this policy statement on child day care which provides: (1) a social and theological rationale; (2) a discussion of the church internally as child care advocate; and (3) a view of the church as advocate for child care in society. Section I discusses the cresting tide of need for child day care in the United States, the role of the church in providing child care and as participant in the national dialogue on child care, and the vocation of the church in child care. Section II discusses evangelism, ministry/service, community ministry, and ministry to unserved or underserved populations as aspects of assuming an intentional mission in child care. Section II also discusses two issues for church-operated child care programs: program quality and the role of the church as Christian educator in child care. Conditions favoring the church's role as child care provider are indicated. Section III describes the church's approach to advocacy, and discusses basic advocacy issues, church exemptions as a challenge to the church's commitment, the well-being of providers, and the church's social responsibility as advocate. Basic advocacy issues addressed include parental choice, and, in terms of the importance of licensing and assuring equity in program quality, standards of quality. (RH)

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POLICY STATEMENT ON CHILD DAY CARE



Adopted by the
Governing Board of the National Council of Churches
November 7, 1984

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I. Social and Theological Rationale

A. The Cresting Tide of Need

The awareness of need for child day care in the United States is not new, nor is the forging of a public policy to undergird such care. Historically, such policies were forged in times of war and national crises and were adopted to address other national priorities. Thus, public policies regarding child care have not been developed from a primary motivation to meet the needs of children or to strengthen families.

Formalized child day care, the programs provided to preschool children outside of their homes, has only recently become a feature on the American family landscape. Late in the nineteenth century "day nurseries" served factory and mill workers, the poor, and the rapidly increasingly immigrant population. Day care centers sprang up during both world wars to accommodate the children of women working to support the war efforts. Any suggestion of child care outside such emergencies was once thought to be a remedial program for pathological families, but child care today has become an American norm. In the last decade child day care has emerged with a sense of permanency and service to all social classes. Since 1980 a majority of mothers of children under five has been employed outside the home. Other trends in birthing patterns and

divorce rates have contributed to the rise in the need for child care both full day and part day.

Since child care services were historically associated with families most in need, they were often looked upon with disdain. Today's economic realities have not succeeded fully in removing the stigma attached to working mothers. And the nation continues to witness to dramatic changes in family life:

- * more parents of both genders and all socio-economic classes are entering the labor force, returning to school and job training programs;
- * there are more divorces, separations, and unmarried parents;
- * there are no indications of a future decline in the numbers of single parent families with young children;
- * there are more families with one or two children, thus fewer siblings are at home, and there is less opportunity for children to gain important socialization experiences;
- * more men and women with established career patterns are having children later in life, making it more likely that they will remain in or re-join the work force.

In the face of these trends, children's needs must be met, for the sake of children and for the sake of the family and society as a whole. Children from all income levels need care, thus

access to services must be available to the poor, the middle class, racial and ethnic minorities and the affluent. Child care, at its best, is a family strengthening service, not a family replacement service. Its objective is to support families in their efforts to provide their children with a total atmosphere conducive to meeting children's needs for wholesome mental, emotional and spiritual development.

Today most American children are the recipients of some form of child care service and, as likely as not, that service is housed in a church building. The church, like the society, is generally without a coherent child care policy. The continuing absence of a national child care policy on the part of the government is not in the best interests of children. The absence on the part of the church — the largest single provider of child care — is a serious detriment to its child care ministry.

B. The Role of the Church

Child care is of urgent concern to all families with children and to the country. Child care must also be an urgent pastoral and prophetic concern for the church.

Today, the church plays a major and primary role as a provider of child care and child care facilities within the nation. For that reason communions are in a unique position to affect child care policies within the society. To date, the church as a whole has been unaware,

ill-informed or indifferent to its role and responsibilities to the pressing national concerns of child care. In addition to its large-scale role as provider the church may now find a major leadership role in the development of public policy in this area of human service.

Because of the magnitude of the present involvement of local churches in child care, the church has a deep, overriding responsibility to initiate, encourage and participate in a national dialogue on child care. Such a dialogue should ultimately yield a coherent and equitable national plan for child care. This plan should involve all sectors of society and should replace the disarray which presently characterizes child care policy. Existing policies lack coherence as well as equity for all children.

Child care concerns are not of a fleeting nature, but pose enduring issues which reach deep into the nation's life. At the heart of a debate lies the future well-being of America's children and families. The church can enrich and strengthen, as well as gain much from its leadership and participation in a national dialogue about child care.

In engaging in that national dialogue the church is consistently guided by its vision that child care services must be: available to all families on an equitable basis, draw resources from all sectors of the society, support the development of the child and the stability of the family, and be regulated in such a manner that encourages the develop-

ment of a variety of program types of high quality in which health and safety are assured. Finally, the church comes to that dialogue prepared to acknowledge its own responsibility to work for quality child day care as a part of its larger ministry to families and the society.

C. A Vocation for the Church

Scripture is replete in both Old and New Testaments with instruction to the faithful to do justice and to provide nurture to persons, including the young. In its historical witness the church through its sacraments, as in baptism and its rituals, as in dedication of infants, has sought to remain faithful to these scriptural injunctions. Family life, too, has long been and remains an important area of ministry at all levels of the life of the church. Drawing from this history, Christians today are called to service in seeking reconciliation and the biblical *shalom* — within families and within the larger society. The church seeks to offer the Good News of Christ to families and to support them in their critical activity of child rearing. The ministry of child care is yet one more way in which the Christian community is called to extend both the nurturing ministry of the church and the prophetic proclamation of justice to children, families, parishes and the society. Few in our society are as vulnerable as children, dependent as they are upon adults for all means of support —

material, emotional, physical and spiritual. Called to witness to God's love and to love of neighbor in advocacy for child care, the church finds again its vocation, and individuals their ministry, in enabling persons to live the lives for which they were created.

Therefore, the church does not come to the complex question of child care devoid of resources. In addition to buildings, so commonly used to house child care programs, the church brings a theology and tradition that offer much to the pursuit of a more authentic understanding of child care.

II. The Church as Child Care Advocate — In Its Own Life

A. Toward Intentional Mission

Child care within local parishes must be assessed as an authentic expression of discipleship as understood by the host congregation. Thus, whether the child care program is church-operated, or merely church-housed, the governing body of the church should be conscientious about its involvement in child care. Congregations must remember that the church's name, reputation and integrity in the community are called to account by all programs offered in their building. Parents who deliver their children at the door of the church believe that they

are entrusting these children to the care of the church. The church must never, therefore, see itself solely as the landlord or custodian of a child care program. Refusing to enter casually into child care, the congregation will wish to offer all its services of work and worship to children and families which enter its doors. As a policy, congregations housing child care need to clarify their own sense of ministry, preparing printed materials to interpret its sense of ministry to others. All services of the church should be offered to families using the child care program. However, participation in a program of worship or mission should not be required as a prerequisite for participation in child care. Through use of its facilities or through the operation of a day care program, the church is carrying on a ministry which should be consistent with the larger conception of mission held by the church. A variety of conceptions of ministry may instruct the congregation in offering child care. Some of these may include:

1. Evangelism — In some instances the church will view its child care programs as outreach and evangelism, intending a ministry which proclaims the Gospel of Jesus Christ in a clear and direct manner. If this is the case, the intentions and purposes should be clearly stated to parents so that their decisions can be well informed.

2. Ministry/Service Child care may be

a parish program intended as a service to the church's own members, an expression of pastoral care and nurture. If so, the assumption should be made explicit that participation in the child care program implies a further commitment to the church.

3. Community Ministry — If the church wishes to use its resources for the good of the community as a whole, the church must make clear that it is providing a community service *without* regard for religious belief, gender, class, race, or national origin and that as a program is part of a broader inclusive ministry. In such an instance religious education is not a component of the program. Once again, the church must express clearly its expectations of the families that participate in the child care program.

4. Ministry to Unserved or Underserved Populations — The church may decide that it is called by its social justice ministry to focus its concern on children with special needs. These might include children from migrant and refugee families, children who have been abused or neglected, or *who* may have emotional or physical disabilities, or for whom English is a second language. If the governing body of the church has made this determination, the church must clearly interpret its call to minister to this particular population. Criteria must be set forth defining the requirements for entrance into the program. This

ministry may involve complications and will call for particular expertise, but may be the most urgently needed and most supportive for the families being served. Ordinarily, these programs will be non-sectarian and have no Christian education component.

These conceptions of ministry are suggestive, not exhaustive, and do not rule out programs such as "mother's morning out," and parent cooperative nursery schools, which may represent the ministries of some churches. In each instance the church must see itself as an inclusive community.

In all of the above categories of ministry, clear understanding of purpose and constancy are required. Congregations must avoid responding hastily to the expressed need for a child care program. It is wise to make decisions to enter the child care field only after a period of thoughtful and reflective study in order to evaluate the factors bearing on decisions and all of the possible implications of those decisions. The congregation has the responsibility to be constant in its nurture of any ministry it accepts, especially since child care necessitates day-to-day monitoring of activities and a concern for the general well-being of the program. In many instances the pastor or lay persons may become advocates, or take direct responsibility for specific aspects of the child care program. In all instances the church should understand that it has entered into a partnership with the child care program.

B. Church-operated Child Care Programs

A church takes on additional responsibilities when it chooses to operate a child care center as a part of the congregation's own programming. These responsibilities may revolve around the following concerns:

1. Quality of Program — In assuming the operation of a child care program, the church is giving its pledge to families that the quality of the program will be of concern to the congregation and governing body. The high standards to be maintained assume a commitment to the quality of the relationship to be achieved between staff and families so that families can place their children in the care of the church with confidence. This confidence must be gained through attention to the children's physical and emotional safety in an area that is child-centered, in an environment that encourages positive learning and growth experiences under the supervision of competent and emotionally stable staff members. Programs must be responsive to the individual child's needs as well as his/her cultural identity. Frequent communications between staff and parents, as well as the invitation to parents to participate in decision making, will support the family.

2. The Role of the Church as Christian Educator in Child Care — By the

very fact that the church has assumed the operation of its own child care program and opened its doors to young children, the church is making a statement about its Christian witness and theology of mission. If the church wishes to include Christian education as a part of its child care program, parents must be made aware of the program philosophy before they make the decision to enroll their children in the program. Christian education in child care programs may find expression in a number of ways, which may include acquainting children with the biblical tradition, the history of the church and confessional creeds, Christian ethical teachings, Christian concepts of love and justice, or other subjects which the church may deem suitable for the age groups being served. In some instances churches may elect to offer programs, open to those of all faiths, which do not explicitly teach Christian doctrine but which still embrace and live by Christian ethical standards. In either case the congregation must be explicit about its Christian education goals.

C. Conditions Favoring the Church's Role as Child Care Provider

As the steward of substantial resources, including real estate, capital, administrative services and health and insurance benefits, the churches are in an ideal position to make child care delivery available to families. Churches

taken in the aggregate are the largest single provider of child care in the United States today. Space, location, and tax exempt status contribute to the desirability of church properties for child care programs. Of course, churches will want to consider carefully the ethical implications of their fee policies for the use of space for this ministry of child care.

With respect to space, location, and tax exempt status, the National Council of Churches and its member communions should conscientiously and imaginatively offer their varied resources as local parishes take on the mantle of provider of child care services and enable local parishes in a child care ministry. Thus, the church can serve as an advocate for child care in its own life and provide a model of stewardship for child care to the society at large.

III. The Church as Advocate for Child Care — In Society

A. The Church's Approach to Advocacy

In matters of public concern the churches have a responsibility to make their voices heard. Since child care is of utmost importance to the present and future well-being of society, the

church's position on child care is an appropriate public policy concern. Further, as the major provider of child care in the United States, the church has a special responsibility to help raise ethical questions about child care. It is the obligation of the church to advocate a coherent, comprehensive, inclusive, and above all, equitable public policy regarding child care. As it approaches public advocacy for child care, the church must be guided by its concern for all sectors of society.

The federal government presently provides subsidies for all child care services through a variety of means to all socio-economic classes. In higher income brackets indirect subsidy is given through tax credits. In lower income groups direct subsidy is provided. These programs were not established in a comprehensive approach to child care, but rather were established in a cumulative fashion. As a result, these programs are inequitable both in the degree to which child care is subsidized and the extent to which parents are permitted to choose programs for their children.

B. Basic Advocacy Issues

1. Parental Choice — In its advocacy for child care the church should be vigilant in guarding the rights of parents to exercise choice in selecting appropriate child care for their children. Government subsidies must be designed to assure maximum stability for child care programs, while reser-

ving to parents the right to choose from among programs to their liking. This goal can only be achieved by the development of policies which allow for some subsidies made directly to parents through a variety of means. In this way the interests of children, their families, and child care providers are all served.

Many factors influence and often determine decisions made by families. For example, programs must be both affordable and accessible, and they must meet requirements of appropriate location, hours of operation, ages served, and educational philosophy.

Parental choice can be maximized and enhanced by the availability of information and referral services. Such services can inform families about existing child care options, document child care needs for the use of policymakers, business and industry, assist in the development of new child care services, and support existing services through the provision of technical assistance. Children and their families of all economic levels and ethnic groups would be served by the establishment of such services. Without access to these services, families are unable to exercise necessary options.

2. Standards of Quality — Interwoven with all other aspects of child care are questions of standards to be maintained. Although quality is a legitimate concern in public policy matters relating to child care, the

church must caution that this concern not be permitted to eliminate cultural choices, which should rightly be reserved to families. Rather, public policy should be confined to regulations concerning enforceable health and safety standards and the requirement of screening to determine the emotional fitness and mental competence of all potential staff persons to be employed within child care centers.

a. The Importance of Licensing

It is important that no child care program be exempt from securing a child care license, ordinarily issued by the state. Child care licensing is an official acknowledgment of the public responsibility to maintain healthy, safe, and developmentally appropriate conditions for children during the time they spend in child care. Licensing is a form of consumer protection for children and their parents.

The goal of child care licensing should be to assure a level of good quality care while taking into account the different types of settings and the numbers of children served in each. Agencies charged with enforcing licensing standards should be publicly visible so that individuals caring for children know about them and can seek technical assistance from them. The standards represented in the licensing statutes should be widely disseminated so that parents will be

in a better position to locate and monitor licensed child care settings. In addition to licensing statutes, health, building, and fire safety codes must also be met. The inspection, monitoring, and enforcement of all applicable statutes should be coordinated to ensure that personnel and fiscal resources are wisely used.

It is with such an understanding of licensing that the churches should urge local parishes to seek compliance with licensing statutes which provide differential standards for centers, group homes, and family homes; that include care of children from infancy through school age; that cover full-time, part-time, drop-in, and emergency care arrangements, and facilities serving children with disabilities.

b. Assuring Equity in Program Quality

It is important that the church insist that public policy require that all programs meet a common set of minimum standards that are independent of both the method or form of payment to be made for services and the source of funds for payment, thus assuring an equity in program quality for all children. A comprehensive and equitable public policy should be formulated in such a way that it serves as an incentive for all potential sources of child care subsidy. These include federal,

state, county and local governments, business and industry, and the voluntary and private sector. It is only through an equity of resources that high program quality and maximum choice for families can be assured.

C. Church Exemptions: A Challenge to the Church's Commitment

A special concern in regard to regulation is the increasing pattern of church groups that have sought to have church sponsored, operated, or housed child care programs exempted from state child care licensing regulations. In this instance the important and cherished rights of the free exercise of religion need not be impeded by government regulation. The regulations of basic health and safety conditions in a building/program that serves young children is the appropriate responsibility of the state and this need not interfere with the free exercise of religion. Thus, the church should neither seek nor accept exemptions from licensing standards and indeed should be responsible for maintaining compliance with these standards in the programs that are offered within their facilities. This compliance does not pre-empt the churches ability and responsibility to actively seek reform of licensing regulations when that activity is warranted and in the best interests of children.

D. The Well-being of Providers

Child care providers as a group are often poorly paid and undervalued. As a natural part of its advocacy for child care, therefore, the church must work with other child advocacy groups to upgrade the image and status of child care professionals, both within and outside the church. Likewise, this advocacy stance should move congregations to a concern that all providers in both church-operated and church-housed programs receive adequate remuneration and benefits, consonant with their experience and education.

E. The Church's Social Responsibility as Advocate

Recognizing the unique role of churches in the provision of child care services, the church must be especially diligent and conscientious in its public advocacy for child care. Member communions of the National Council of the Churches of Christ should:

1. Continue, through its Child Advocacy Working Group in the Division of Church and Society, to provide a forum in which its member communions may be assisted to develop, coordinate and implement child care advocacy strategies.
2. Become informed about the conditions existing today and the issues involved in the design of an adequate public policy for child care.

3. Use the appropriate councils and agencies of the churches to monitor public policy at federal, state, and local levels of government.

4. Take an active part in promoting a national dialogue in which the church will help to frame the questions to be addressed in the formation of public policy.

5. Call upon staff of church agencies in Washington, D.C. and within the states who are charged with particular responsibility for the church's involvement in public policy processes, to monitor, serve as an advocate, raise issues, and bring the voice of the church to bear on child care policy development.

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